

Joining a virtual action learning set

What is a virtual action learning set?

A virtual or audio action learning set is a group of up to six people who contract to meet regularly with an action learning facilitator using audio teleconferencing. They usually meet four or five times over 12 months. Each meeting lasts three to four hours (with a short break) and runs at a time agreed by all. Learning sets are usually made up of peers who work at similar levels of responsibility. The benefit of audio action learning is that it can bring together people based throughout the UK or the world, either within an organisation or across sectors.

What happens when I join a virtual set?

Set members come together for an initial short briefing and contracting session with the facilitator who explains the process and makes sure everyone is comfortable with the logistics of working in the virtual world.

What happens during each meeting?

- each meeting starts with introductions and each set member reports briefly on what has been happening for them
- the set members then choose who will speak about a particular situation they are currently facing. This is known as presenting
- the presenter describes the situation, problem or challenge
- set members ask open questions which help the presenter come to a deeper or different understanding and so be open to new solutions, attitudes and behaviour changes
- the other set members do not give advice, tell anecdotes, pass judgement or talk about their own situation - they stay focussed on the presenter
- the set helps the presenter review their options and decide on action
- set members respond to the presenter about what they have heard, talk about their own individual learning and reflect on the group process
- the presenter takes what they have learnt back to their workplace - initiating changes and trying new ideas or approaches
- during the next set meeting the presenter reports on the action they have taken

What does the facilitator do?

- the facilitator establishes the ground rules and keeps the set on course
- focuses the set on the presenter
- creates safety for individuals to explore sensitive issues
- takes the set beyond superficial analysis
- helps the set draw out learning
- enables the set to reflect on group process
- introduces the set to other tools for exploration, analysis and solution generation

Virtual action learning

"The end of learning is action, not knowledge"

Dr Peter Honey

What can virtual action learning offer me?

- space for individual reflective learning
- learning which you can take back to your workplace and translate into action
- the opportunity to gain support and challenge from a group of peers
- the chance to work smarter and find creative ways to bring about change
- a chance to test your beliefs and assumptions and learn what works for others
- a safe environment to explore new ways of thinking and doing
- personal, as well as professional, learning and development
- insight into how others achieve different solutions
- a chance to progress new opportunities and develop new ideas
- structured time away from the work environment to consider what you are doing, without the travel time and expense
- an opportunity to develop and improve your leadership and facilitative skills in the virtual world

What can virtual action learning offer my organisation or business?

- an innovative yet proven form of successful organisational development with colleagues around the globe
- fresh approaches for organisations seeking new directions or facing change
- a chance to put established practice and development under the spotlight
- testing more efficient ways of working
- learning which underpins improved delivery for customers, clients and beneficiaries
- an environmentally sustainable method of development for geographically dispersed leaders

Guidance on virtual action learning

- Make time for virtual action learning - just because you are not travelling to a session don't try to squeeze action learning into a busy schedule. The session will last up to three to four hours but book at least 20 minutes in your diary before and after, so you have time to prepare and to reflect on your learning.
- Participate from a quiet location and ideally where you are not visible to others. Ideally you should use a headset that covers both ears. The headset increases your ability to concentrate on what is happening in the virtual space and minimises background noise for the other set members.
- Sessions last for up to three to four hours (with a short break) so keep a supply of non-noisy snacks and drinks handy.
- Decide where it is best for you to be for the session - a space that aids reflection.
- If you are at your desk, it is best to clear away clutter and anything that may distract you.
- Feel free to make empathetic noises. Just as you would nod or smile to give the presenter reassurance in a face to face meeting - it's good to respond verbally to reassure and support the presenter.
- Don't follow telephone conferencing etiquette. Some organisations have developed very bad habits! Virtual action learning is very different from normal telephone conferencing. Your facilitator will guide you on the difference.
- Don't feel you have to interrupt the silence. The power of virtual action learning includes holding that space between you which allows for reflection.

The ground rules

As a member of an action learning set there are some simple ground rules to follow

- you are making a firm contract with your fellow set members
- always respect the confidentiality of the set
- your questions should be open and inquiring to help the person presenting

contract

- the contract means being there for every meeting
- if you decide to leave the set you should talk about your decision during a meeting because it affects everyone
- the set will agree the period of the contract and at the end of this period will review if it wishes to continue to meet

confidentiality

- what happens in the set stays in the set and must remain confidential
- do not discuss the content of set meetings, or the relationships between members, outside set meetings - this includes discussions with other set members unless
- the presenter asks for help, advice or support from another set member or
- the presenter themselves initiates the discussion. For example, it is not ok to ask how the other person is getting on with something they presented at a set meeting. However, it is ok to discuss it if the presenter initiates the discussion.

presenter's space

- the person presenting can take as much time as they need to describe the situation
- when listening you learn the value of silence as reflection time
- the space belongs to the presenter - so don't tell your own stories or give advice (unless specifically requested)
- the set gives the presenter a safe place to talk about feelings, admit need and ask for help
- your role is to ask inquiring questions to help the presenter - not to argue a point or demonstrate your own cleverness
- try not to be judgmental in your questioning.
- the presenter can always say that they don't want to answer a question.

questions

- ask **open** questions - **who? what? why? when? where? how?**
- listen carefully to each other's questions and, if it is helpful, ask something which follows on from the previous train of questioning
- guard against being competitive in your questioning
- you will learn to assess if the direction of questioning is helpful or needs changing.
- you can always ask the presenter if it is helpful for them to pursue a certain line of questioning.

Typical action learning questions

What is your biggest difficulty or problem?

How do you feel about this situation?

Why did you approach the situation in the way you described?

What could you do differently?

Why can't you do it?

If you could only change one thing, what would it be?

What will this look like?

Where else might you look for allies?

Who else would be most excited by this possibility?

What learning are you taking from this session?

What are you trying to achieve?

What can you do about it?

How does the situation affect you?

How could you solve this problem?

What's the best possible outcome?

What's the worst thing that might happen?

What could you start to do differently?

When will you start?

Who could help?

How important is this to you?

What action are you going to take?